and all the Bleſſings you enjoy, which make Life comfortable to yourſelf, or render you uſeful to others. 2. By the Frequency and Fervency of your Thanksgivings for thoſe Providences, which keep or deliver you from Danger, which prevent you from falling into Sin, which bring you in the Way of the Means of Grace, which are ſuited to quicken and forward you in Faith and Holineſs.

Note, *The Illuſtrations, added to each of the foregoing Subjects, are deſigned to help Inexperience, to undeceive the Preſuming, and to ſatisfy the Doubting. In the uſe of them, all ſhould be cautioned againſt being forward and aſſuming on the one hand, in thinking and ſpeaking of themſelves more highly than they ought, which will effectually hinder all farther Improvement: and on the other hand, againſt being too much dejected, if they find they do not come up to ſome of them. We muſt ground ourſelves wholly on the Lord Jeſus Chriſt for Salvation, be thankful for the Meaſure of Grace which is given us, be careful to improve it, and in all Faithfulneſs and Love to our Redeemer preſs on to higher Degrees of Perfection.*

FINIS.

RELIGIOUS DECLENSION:

A

SERMON

PREACHED BEFORE THE

DISSENTING MINISTERS

OF LANCASHIRE AND CHESHIRE,

AT THEIR

ANNUAL MEETING AT BOLTON,

JUNE XX, MDCCLXXXVII.

By WILLIAM TATTERSAL.

WARRINGTON,

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MDCCLXXXVII.

A

SERMON, &c.

PSALM lxxxv. 6.

WILT THOU NOT REVIVE US AGAIN, THAT THY PEOPLE MAY REJOICE IN THEE?

THERE have been few periods, in which diſcourſes upon the decay of religion were more wanted than at preſent, if theſe could ſtem the torrent of impiety, which is flowing in ſo faſt upon us.—But, alas! it is in the power of theſe to do little. Under a mournful ſenſe of the low ſtate of this ſacred cauſe, our ultimate hope of its revival muſt be placed in the Great Head of his church. With the Pſalmiſt, addreſſing the Supreme Being, we muſt devoutly ſay, *Wilt thou not revive us again, that we may rejoice in thee?*

Something, however, may be done by human means. We may point out the *ſymptoms*,

and the *cauſes*, and perhaps direct a little to the *cure*, of religious indifference. We may ſuggeſt ſome conſiderations, which may ſtrike the ſerious and attentive: and it may pleaſe the great and wiſe Being, who ſupports and promotes religion by the inſtrumentality of ſecond cauſes, to give efficacy to theſe conſiderations.

Humbly hoping that he will thus bleſs what is farther to be ſaid, I proceed to ſhew,

I. That there is amongſt us a manifeſt decay of religion.

II. What ſeem to be ſome of the moſt probable cauſes of this decay.

III. What means may, under the divine bleſſing, effect the cure of it.

I. We are to ſhew, that there is amongſt us a manifeſt decay of religion: a propoſition, of the truth of which a very little obſervation affords ample proof. The ſlighteſt compariſon of preſent with former times, will convince us of it.

Men are indeed always too ready to complain of the degeneracy of their own age, and it is not wiſe to dwell much upon it. We are in danger of making an unfavourable compariſon; becauſe we may be vexed with the vices and follies which we ſee around us; and becauſe we *know* much more of preſent, than we do of preceding manners. Except a few actions which hiſtory has tranſmitted to us, the vices and follies of former ages are buried with

with their authors; whilſt we have a full inſpection of the ſcene that is now acting.

But, notwithſtanding this circumſtance, we have the greateſt reaſon to conclude, that there is a certain decay of religion at preſent. The hiſtory of paſt times informs us, that there were greater zeal and ſteadineſs than we ſee now. We know that there muſt have been, or our ſocieties would never have been raiſed and formed. Would the preſent ſpirit have braved a formidable oppoſition, erected edifices, ſupported expences, and entered upon plans, which at firſt excite double reproach and contempt? Does it not rather ſhrink from the few difficulties which yet remain, and which muſt ever attend a profeſſion different from that which is eſtabliſhed? Bear witneſs, ye deſerted ſeats! ye mouldering walls! I will add, ye miniſters! whoſe learning, whoſe wiſdom, and whoſe virtue, are often neglected for the ſociety of the ignorant, the ſenſual, and the worthleſs. Do ye bear witneſs to the decay of religion! Let the numerous inſtances, of a love of the world, of a conformity to its follies, of a willingneſs to explain away the difference between us and thoſe of any religion —and thoſe of no religion—let theſe bear witneſs to the ſame melancholy truth.

The youngeſt of us muſt have ſeen religion decay in our own times; muſt have ſeen the love which many had for it, grow cold. We muſt have ſeen, that as the grave and ſerious old die away, their ſerioufneſs often dies with

them. Their deſcendants and connections *profeſs* perhaps to tread in the ſame ſteps; but they tread not in them with equal vigour and conſtancy. The profeſſion, which the young and the modern make, is often little more than the form of what our fathers made. Venerable ſhades! we revere your piety and perſeverance, and with a ſigh acknowledge, that they are no more!

The ſymptoms of religious indifference are too many and too ſtrong. The mention of ſome of them may ſerve to confirm our poſition. Let us begin with the NEGLECT OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS. This is a ſtriking characteriſtic of profeſſors, in the preſent day. How general is it, to attend public ſervices only when not the leaſt inconvenience interferes; and to make the ſlighteſt indiſpoſition, or the moſt unworthy avocation, an excuſe for neglecting them? This conduct is a certain ſymptom of indifference. Attendance upon religious ordinances is an eſſential part of a religious ſpirit. Where the latter ſubſiſts in any vigour, the former is conſtantly and cheerfully given.

All pretence that poſitive inſtitutions are of ſmall importance, is groundleſs, and generally made in excuſe for a neglect, which conſcience cannot approve. And where there is this neglect, there are ſuch other properties in the character, as confirm the ſuppoſition, that it proceeds from a decay of religion.

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You tell us, you can abſent yourſelves from public worſhip, and yet be religious. We only aſk, Are you, in other reſpects, as much ſo, as when you felt no wiſh to abſent yourſelves from it? Does not indolence, irreſolution, a love of the world, or ſome other mark of declenſion, grow upon you? Be perſuaded, then, that your negligence is a more alarming ſymptom than you are aware. You may not feel, but others ſee, its fatal effects. You may yet retain ſo much of the knowledge you gained, and the habits you formed, when you were more regular, that you may not be ſenſible of your loſs; but is your knowledge ſo freſh upon your minds, and are your religious habits ſo pleaſant, as they once were? No: their power has become weaker, and in its laſt ſtages it will weaken much faſter. It will decline, till it ceaſes to give any impulſe to virtue, or any check to vice.

This neglect is attended alſo with another ſymptom of declenſion; ENCOURAGING A FREEDOM AND LICENTIOUSNESS OF SENTIMENT.

Let not this aſſertion ſtartle the friends of rational and liberal inveſtigation. It is not meant to militate againſt the freeſt inquiry. This we never wiſh to check. Pure and practical religion have nothing to fear, but, on the contrary, much to hope, from it.

What is meant is, that a proneneſs to ſeek objections to particular modes of faith and forms of worſhip, is often a ſymptom of declenſion; becauſe it really proceeds from a

diſinclination to the purity and ſtrictneſs of religion; or from pride and a love of diſtinction; though perhaps thoſe who make them may not be ſenſible of the true cauſe. We are often inſenſible of the motives from which we act; and eſpecially, when they are not upright ones. We have methods of ſelf deceit, by which we keep the diſingenuous part of our conduct even from our own inſpection.

Many, who have paid attention to the public offices of religion, begin to break it off, and aſſign as a reaſon, that they are not of the ſame ſentiments with the ſocieties to which they belong. "They could wiſh, they ſay, "to hear the preaching; but it is too ortho-"dox." Others lament, that they can receive no benefit from the ſervices of their miniſter, "becauſe he is not, what they call, a goſpel-preacher."

We muſt tell you, that your objections ſhew only the wrongneſs of your own hearts. They may ſeem plauſible pretences, but they are really ſymptoms of religious decay. If you were honeſt and ſerious Chriſtians, you might receive edification from the ſervices of a plain practical preacher, whatever were his doctrinal ſentiments. But you like not the regularity, the ſelf-denial, and reſolution, which an attendance upon eſtabliſhed forms requires; and you ſeek for a ſpeculation of the head, in order to excuſe an error of the heart. Or, what is worſe, you ſeek to diſtinguiſh yourſelves; and

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are fonder of controverſy, than of piety and virtue.

Another ſymptom of declenſion is, A NEGLECT OF DEVOTION. From the writings and the hiſtory of our anceſtors it is evident, that they far excelled us in the regularity and fervour, with which they performed this duty. They eſteemed the neglect of it as utterly inconſiſtent with a religious life: but it is now by many neglected, without remorſe. And where it is practiſed, how faint and formal is the practice! How unlike the warm and chearful ſervice of former times! The ſcriptures omitted,—a ſhort and general prayer read over, to an audience taken immediately from ſcenes, which ſtill play before their eyes, and preclude all ſerious thought, to an audience, who give their *perſons*, rather than their *minds*; and who, the moment of their releaſe, ruſh upon their purſuits, without even the appearance of preſerving any good impreſſion! This is not devotion. This is not the way, in which religion muſt be kept alive. It is a certain ſymptom of decay. To theſe ſymptoms, many others might be added: but, omitting them, as too obvious and too numerous, let us proceed to conſider:

II. Some of the CAUSES of religious languor and decay. Theſe are many in number, and very different in different perſons and ſocieties. But perhaps ſome general ones may be ſtated, which, under various modifications,

have more or leſs effect upon the declenſions that moſt frequently happen.

Firſt; The manifeſt tendency which men have to fall off from any profeſſion, WHEN THEY LOSE SIGHT OF THE OBJECT IMMEDIATELY IN VIEW. Now though the great object of all religious inſtitutions ought to be, the ſupport of religion; yet, circumſtanced as we are, there muſt be in them a ſecondary object; ſuch as, the eſtabliſhment or promotion of our own mode of worſhip, in oppoſition to that of others. And this object, on account of its nearneſs, or of the conduct of our opponents, and of the paſſions which their meaſures have excited, often has great influence.

To inſtance in our profeſſion, as DISSENTERS. Our fathers were men of integrity and ſpirituality, and were no doubt influenced by the moſt pious motives: but they were alſo influenced by motives ariſing from the times and circumſtances in which they lived. Warm from diſputes, and ſmarting under the laſh of perſecution, they made a zealous profeſſion, and hoped one day to ſee that profeſſion victorious. But the conquerors and the conquered are now no more: and their deſcendants have not inherited their ſpirit. Perſonal injuries are forgotten; and the different ſides have by degrees worn off that aſperity which ſtimulated their zeal.

Hence, in part, ariſes the neglect of religious inſtitutions. We have loſt ſight of the

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temporal object, and the *grand* object is to many minds too remote. Somewhat akin to this cauſe, is,

Secondly; IGNORANCE OF, AND INATTENTION TO, RELIGIOUS TRUTHS. In all perſons, even in the moſt ſtudious and literary, knowledge is apt to decay. But in the generality of men it decays very faſt; their purſuits are not friendly to it; and in a ſhort time, the moſt that is remembered is, a general but inaccurate acquaintance with ſome of its primary principles.

We muſt confeſs, that with reſpect to religious knowledge, men labour under ſome diſadvantages. It has not that relation to common life, that entertainment, that preſent reward, which other parts of ſcience more commonly have. We muſt alſo add, that the greater part of our moſt zealous practical writers have expreſſed themſelves, rather in a dull and denouncing, than in a lively and inviting manner. Truſting to the weight and importance, and ſtanding in awe, of their ſubject, they have ſometimes *alarmed*, but they have ſeldom *allured* men. And well meant performances, if void of all eloquence and animation, will not often be *attended to*, and never *remembered*, as they ought.

To theſe and other cauſes is owing that ignorance of religious truths, which is ſo common, and which hath moſt unhappy effects. Where it prevails, good impreſſions cannot often be *made*, and ſcarcely ever *preſerved*.

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When their importance is not ſeen, they have little influence, and are ſoon effaced. Knowledge is the neceſſary foundation, upon which religion muſt be built. We ſeldom give *attention* to a ſubject, of which we *know* nothing, and upon which we are *incapable* of reflecting in the hours of retirement and thought. But a *frequent* and an *habitual* attention to religious ſubjects, is eſſential to a religious life, and is that, without which, it will unavoidably die away.

A third cauſe is, NEGLECT IN INSTRUCTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH. Thoſe who have themſelves loſt the greateſt part of their religious knowledge, cannot be expected to give much to their children: and many of our brethren have not of late condeſcended to the humble, but uſeful office, of catechiſing the young. There is an apology in ſome places for this neglect, ariſing from the prejudiced opinion, and dictatorial ſpirit, of their hearers. They have been expected to teach forms, which, whether right or wrong, are certainly too abſtruſe for children; and had they introduced others, they would perhaps have excited diſſention. This is a difficulty; but ſomething ſhould be done. It is little that we can teach children in this way; but this little is perhaps the moſt they will ever learn. They are about to be launched into the ocean of life, abounding with dangers, through which it is next to impoſſible that they ſhould ſteer with ſafety, unleſs we give them

them ſome directions. We ſhould, we ſhould impreſs upon their minds ſome principles of conduct, while they are impreſſible, or they will be loſt. Few that have not ſet out well, have ended well. Many fall away, notwithſtanding the pains that have been taken with them; but they are generally a longer time before they become ſo vicious as others; and moſt of thoſe who hold faſt their integrity, were well inſtructed in their youth.

A fourth cauſe is, ENTHUSIASM AND BIGOTED ZEAL. Theſe for a while produce great effects, and *ſeem* to revive religion: but they only ſeem to do it. Like thoſe fires, which burn rapidly and irregularly for a moment, and then vaniſh away, their ſplendid effects will ſoon ceaſe. They make men oſtentatious and noiſy, but not really virtuous: and as they are founded only in weakneſs and paſſion, their influence cannot be laſting. But the harm they do to the world at large is great indeed. Many judge of religion, not by the arguments brought to ſupport it, but by the manners of thoſe who embrace it. Great numbers are not *capable* of judging by any other method; and right thinking does not ſo often guide the judgment and the conduct, even of thoſe who are capable of it, as prejudice and habit. Men know that the characters of profeſſors are no argument againſt their religion, yet they confound both together: and ſome men of the greateſt ingenuity and ſubtlety have been led to write againſt chriſtianity

tianity, by the ſuperſtition and folly which they ſaw around them. At leaſt, the view of theſe has given them greater advantage againſt it.

The laſt cauſe of declenſion we ſhall aſſign is, A FONDNESS FOR SCEPTICISM AND CAVILLING. Oppoſite as this is to the laſt mentioned cauſe, it is ſimilar in its effects. They both produce indifference to religion: and of the two errors, ſcepticiſm is the more dangerous. It perverts the reaſoning powers, and renders men incapable of a rational conviction. It ſtops the ſpring of thoſe conſolations and hopes, which ſhould ſupport under the evils of life, and animate to a virtuous conduct. It leaves the mind vacant, and unfixes the affections. In ſuch a ſtate, it is next to certain, that ſome of the many temptations to vice will be finally victorious. The qualities from which ſcepticiſm ariſes are ſometimes good, but oftener bad. A love of knowledge, and enlarged views; a wiſh to diſcover ſome new ſenſe of a ſcripture doctrine, or to obviate the objections made againſt it, may, in ſome circumſtances, lead to a more innocent kind of ſcepticiſm.

An ill directed, or an undue attention to polemical works, may alſo lead to it; and it becomes ſome, whoſe intentions we doubt not, are upright, to conſider, how their very free inquires may affect leſs cultivated minds. Though they leave themſelves believers, they may leave their readers wavering. And if they

they take off a reverence for ſcripture, they may take from ignorance its only inſtruction, and from anxiety its only conſolation.

We pity thoſe, who are thus unguardedly led into a way that will be fatal to their peace and happineſs: but we look with indignation upon the more numerous tribes, who are led into ſcepticiſm by pride and ſenſuality—to ſhew their wit, or to excuſe their wickedneſs. And ſuch wit is often uſed upon theſe occaſions, as would be deſpiſed upon any other, for its meanneſs and ſtupidity—uſed by people of little knowledge, and no judgment; people who never read the controverſy, and who have not ſenſe to comprehend an argument. But it is uſed in the ſervice of licentiouſneſs, and it finds many friends. We muſt however tell ſceptics of this character, that their ſcepticiſm is nothing but vice; and that it will be puniſhed, like all other vice, in proportion to its malignity and exceſs. It is at once a ſymptom, and a cauſe of declenſion. All we have to ſay to them is, what our Saviour hath ſaid already, *He that believeth ſhall be ſaved*; and *He that believeth not, ſhall be condemned.*

We proceed to the moſt difficult and delicate part of the ſubject, which is;

III. To point out ſome means which may, under the divine bleſſing, contribute to the cure of this religious decay.

1. A PRACTICAL STRAIN OF PREACHING. Circumſtances have been ſuch amongſt us, as

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to render ſpeculative and controverſial preaching neceſſary. To enlighten men's minds, and to baniſh error and abſurdity, are undoubtedly important objects. But in attempting to do this, has not religion been often baniſhed? There certainly is not that ſerioufneſs and zeal in many of our more liberal congregations, which there once was; and which there now is, more generally at leaſt, in thoſe places, where miniſters have not endeavoured ſo much the correction of the ſentiments, as the improvement of the heart. So limited is the human comprehenſion, eſpecially in the bulk of our people, imperfectly educated, and immerſed in buſineſs and pleaſure, that if their attention be directed to knowledge, it is often diverted from practice: and not only ſo, but they fall into errors, equally dangerous with thoſe they have abandoned. The free make as great a merit of diſbelieving, as the rigid make of believing, the diſputed tenets of Calviniſm. And both agree only in this, to differ upon ſubjects they neither of them underſtand, and to neglect the far weightier matters of practical Chriſtianity. The greater part of thoſe who are the moſt fond of ſpeculative knowledge, and of diſtinguiſhing themſelves for it, whether among the rigid or the free, are ſelf-opinionated, and ſhut up againſt all conviction, or practical improvement. Have open attempts to rectify error done more good or harm? They have excited the bittereſt contentions — brought digrace upon religion — broken

broken up ſocieties—and wreſted our pulpits into the hands of the moſt wild and illiterate enthuſiaſts. Whilſt in many places, where the miniſter has made practical preaching his great object, cautiouſly avoided ſpeculation, and yet ſilently ſoftened ſome exceſſes, and inſtilled more rational ſentiments, harmony has been preſerved, religion has flouriſhed, and the people have been gradually refined. They have almoſt kept pace, even in number, with their more controverſial neighbours. Religious ſocieties have a natural tendency to advance, both in knowledge and taſte; and Providence ſo orders, that when they are upright and diligent, they have means of inſtruction put into their hands, without danger to their union. Such is the ſpread of new light, when it has once broken in upon us, and ſuch are the intercourſes of chriſtians one with another, that the intelligent and inquiring, in any ſociety, have guides to reformation, without the aid of their miniſter: and thus, no occaſion of diſturbance is given to the forward and the violent.

Let it not from this be underſtood, that temporizing is recommended. We may preach in perfect conſiſtency with our views. We need lay no ſtreſs upon points, on which we have doubts; nor uſe any phraſes, which we cannot approve. We may even occaſionally advance modern opinions, if we advance them in a ſerious and ſubdued manner, in order to anſwer ſome practical purpoſe. But ſhould

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we not keep clear of that open controverſy, which ſays, "I will at all adventures change your ſentiments;" which alarms the ignorance of ſome, and excites the impudence of others?

2. Another mothod of reviving religion might perhaps be, A MORE FAMILIAR STILE OF PREACHING. Seeking to become correct and elegant, we become unintelligible; or, if not abſolutely unintelligible, yet our compoſition is weakened, and rendered too faint to make any deep or permanent impreſſion.

It is ſurpriſing, how little the generality, loſt in the world, and eſtranged from intellectual employments, can comprehend of a well written diſcourſe. Of many words and ſentences, which we think as plain as poſſible, they have no definite ideas. If they have ſome confuſed gueſs at our meaning, yet a chaſte and literary repreſentation has not much effect. Could we condeſcend to borrow our words from common life, our illuſtrations and arguments from common things, ſhould we not gain much more attention?

3. It would certainly be uſeful, at leaſt in moſt places and circumſtances, TO ENCOURAGE SOCIAL MEETINGS FOR SOME RELIGIOUS ACTS, in the courſe of the week. Such meetings have been decried, becauſe they have been abuſed; but in the hands of intelligent, moderate perſons, and devoted principally to practical ſubjects, they would ſucceed better.

Frequent

Frequent and familiar aſſembling together was amongſt the principal means, by which the firſt Chriſtians gave ardour to their cauſe. Whenever ſects have ariſen and flouriſhed, this practice hath aſſiſted their growth: and when they have relinquiſhed this, they have haſtened to decay. Hiſtory, obſervation, and experience concur to evince, that religious ſocieties almoſt univerſally decline, when they do not aſſemble more frequently, and more freely, than on the weekly ſeaſons of public worſhip. So long as men devote ſix days to the world, and only one to religion, it will be morally impoſſible, that the world ſhould not gain the aſcendency. That to which we give the greateſt ſhare of our time, and of our hearts, will naturally be uppermoſt in our thoughts; and will prevent their fixing with attention or effect upon any other ſubject.

Beſides, the ſtrongeſt argument is, that the plain and popular manner in which private meetings are conducted, often gives more knowledge and more ſerioufneſs, than we can give in our public miniſtrations. Thoſe homely illuſtrations and examples, which moſt of all elucidate a ſubject, and enliven the affections, are thought beneath the dignity of our place. A correctneſs and a method are expected from us, which to many create an obſcurity. And though compoſition is loſt upon the generality of our audience, yet we have moſt of us a few hearers, who have a little judgment, and leſs candour. Standing

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in too much awe of theſe, we allay the ſpirit and freedom of an addreſs; and, while we ſeek to pleaſe, we ceaſe to edify.

Theſe conſiderations may ſerve to ſhew the utility of ſocial religious intercourſes: nor would the difficulty of eſtabliſhing theſe intercourſes be ſo great, as timidity may at firſt imagine. To the well diſpoſed young, and to many who have leiſure, they would prove an agreeable method of filling up vacant hours. Buſineſs and pleaſure are made to give way to many employments, far leſs convenient. If once begun, and well regulated, they would acquire ſtrength in their progreſs, and be ſome of the firmeſt ſupports of our intereſts.

4. The moſt effectual method of reviving religion would certainly be, ATTENTION TO THE YOUNG: not merely by catechiſing children (though that is a very important duty of the paſtoral office) but by forming young perſons into claſſes, to learn the principal doctrines and duties of chriſtianity, and to receive different inſtructions, according to their different abilities and deſignations. A celebrated writer * of our denomination argues, that "miniſters ſhould beſtow their labour chiefly "on the young, inſtructing them in the prin-"ciples of religion, inculcating good maxims, "forming them to good habits, and making "every thing in religious diſcipline familiar "to them. This," ſays he, "is bending the

* Dr. Prieſtley.

"oak

"oak while it is pliable, and while the taſk "is not difficult. But, with reſpect to per- "ſons advanced in life, all that we can hope "to do is, to palliate exceſſes, and prevent "enormities. The character, the general "temper and turn of mind, are fixed, and "can no more be made to bend to our efforts, "than an oak of ſome growth and ſtanding."

It is for thoſe who have more experience to ſay, how little alteration can be made in characters already formed. But with reſpect to the young, we ſee, that wherever a particular attention is paid them, the ſucceſs in general is great indeed! So many circumſtances are in their favour, that ſucceſs is morally certain. Prejudices have ſeldom taken deep root, habits are not grown inveterate. In the latter ſtages of youth, thoſe two great faculties of the ſoul, memory and imagination, are in perfection. In this period, the mind is ſeldom overwhelmed with buſineſs, or diſtracted with anxiety. The paſſions are warm, and fix with vigour upon their object. There is a natural deſire to engage in ſomething, which ſhall give exerciſe to the capacity. By cultivating ſuch a ſoil, what ſeminaries of future churches might we form! To what animating proſpects would they raiſe declining ſocieties! And what conſolation would they afford to a miniſter, amidſt all the fatigues of his calling, amidſt all the obloquy and ingratitude of mankind!

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